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Kristallnacht

(Night of the Broken Glass)

Professor Friedrich commissar, stood in front of our class, his back curved, his heavy brows under his unruly white hair drawn close together. He was not our school's principal but an Aryan "advisor", charged by the Nazi regime to keep order in the "Jew-School" for girls, to which I had been assigned shortly after Hitler's March 1938 annexation of Austria. I liked the dignified old gentleman, a retired school - principal. He would visit our classroom and read us stories in his deep mellow voice, encouraging us to talk about the meaning of those stories, The tales would deal with feelings of self-worth, freedom and knowledge. In his soft Viennese accent Professor Friedrich would point out that those were the only worthwhile possession which could not be confiscated or destroyed. Not until many years later did I understand the chance he had taken to attempt to give us something of lasting value.

This day was different. Professor Friedrich carried no books; entering the briskly and formally he stood a few moments in front of the class looking at us. He straightened his back, removed his pince-nez and slowly, methodically wiped them with a large white handkerchief, examined them, continued to wipe. Realizing Professor Friedrich's reluctance to speak, I sensed that something must be very wrong.

"Young ladies", the commissar cleared his throat, "school is closing early today." Snapping his glasses back on his nose, he looked slowly around the room at twenty-five attentive girls. "Go straight home; don't run, don't stop, walk normally." He stopped, glanced towards the window, his voice low. "There is unrest in the streets. A synagogue a block away is burning, go home now and God be with you."

Filing out of the classroom, acrid smells assaulted us. Smoke stung our eyes, burning our throats. Gerda and I stopped just long enough to say "Good-by". I watched my best friend walk home past the burning Synagogue. It was the Temple where I had attended High Holiday services with my parents, and had proudly touched the plaque with my Grandfather Moritz's name under a stained glass window. There were no firemen. People just stood and watched. No one doused the fire and our Synagogue went up in flames.

Just before I turned the corner of Mariahilferstrasse, I looked back and saw Gerda crossing the street and scurrying through the staring crowds. Gerda did not come back to school and I never saw her again. I heard later that on that evening Gerda's father and grandfather were loaded onto a truck full of men and driven away.

It was November 10th, three days after my 12th birthday; the events of that day and the previous night would later be referred to as "Kristallnacht", "Night of broken glass."

Walking home no Mariahilferstrasse, one of Vienna's main boulevards, I tried not to look right or left. I was walking around broken glass scattered all over the sidewalk from smashed store windows, from shops with names of Korf, Acker, Guttman. I quickly made my way past signs that had "Jude" and the Star of David smeared on them with yellow paint. People were shouting, throwing rocks, bottles and buckets of paint at stores. I had enjoyed gazing at the window displays of the elegant shops. There were swastikas and seals now, taped across the doors and signs saying "Closed" and "Under new management."

Nazis with guns and nightsticks were everywhere. Hitler Youth, in their smart uniforms were laughing, joking, splashing glue, and slapping signs on storefronts. Afraid I would be noticed, I was walking faster and faster, yet my legs did not seem to move forward. Realizing I was almost running, I remembered Professor Friedrich's warning and forced myself to slow down.

Turning the corner, I saw Mrs. Ganz candy shop sealed off with tape, a Star of David smeared across the window. Nice Mr. Strauss, who sold feathers and trimmings for ladies hats, had tape and seals across his door. Then I saw Mr. Strauss – old dignified Mr. Strauss – on his hands and knees, in his navy blue coat and hat, the one he wore to when he walked with his gold tipped cane to Synagogue on Friday evenings, scrubbing a Star of David of the sidewalk. Uniformed men towered over him, kicking at the bucket, sloshing soapy water

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on him, shouting "Mach schnell, mach schon." "Hurry up, get on with it." Spectators stood about enjoying the show.

I tried not to look or think. It was all too much. Staring at the sidewalk, I counted cracks, like I did when I was a little girl. Only a few more steps to the apartment house on Neubaugasse where we had to move after Nazis has confiscated our possessions. Pushing hard against the front door, I stopped just inside to catch my breath. Momentarily I felt warm and safe in the dim vestibule. Climbing up the stairs I saw notices and tapes sealing off doors of several apartments.

Afraid to know what awaited me I raced up the stairs. Burning fear gripped me, my temples pounded, my ears felt hot and my mouth was dry. A great sigh of relief escaped me when I saw no tapes sealing Mrs. Drexler's door, the apartment where my parents had been forced to rent two rooms. I threw open the door to the front hall and stopped short, startled by the strange scene before me. Several women, one wrapped in a fur coat, were sitting on the floor, on suitcases, and on the one available chair. A toddler in pajamas and robe was bouncing on a bundle of bedding. An elderly couple sat close together whispering in a corner.

I curtsied, smiled, murmured "Grusz Gott", and quickly made my way to our quarters in the rear of the apartment.

"Mutti, what's going on out there?"

"Sweetheart, thank God you're home." My mother wrapped her arms tightly around me and held me close. Relaxing a little but still breathless I clung to my mother.

"Mr. Strauss, the one who sells feathers, men are making him scrub the sidewalk. Mrs. Ganz's shop is sealed closed and we were sent home early from school. Grandpapa's synagogue is burning and nobody is putting out the fire. I'm scared."

"You're here with me now, you're all right." My mother kissed me on the forehead. "Yes, terrible things are going on, Renatchen. Men are being arrested. Nazis are throwing Jewish families out of their homes, allowing them only a few minutes to grab a few belongings, and quartering them with other Jewish families. I think there are three families out there in the hallway."

"Where is Pappi, Mommy? It's twelve thirty?" My father, always punctual, should have been home by now.

"I don't know, I don't know where he is."

My mother, attempting to hide her anxiety returned to her unfinished game of solitaire. Nervously flipping the miniature solitaire deck, she tried to concentrate on the game.

"He left early this morning to stand in line at the French Embassy. He's trying to secure our visas. Oh God, I hope he is safe."

Watching the clock hand make it's way around the dial, I attempted to read. I saw the words but they did not form into sentences. I stared out the window. I could see the opposite side of the street, not where my father would be walking. A man passed briskly, swinging his briefcase jauntily as my father did before all this. He walks slowly these days, his tall figure stooped, carrying his leather case as though it contained rocks. I craned my neck, pressing my face against the windowpane, trying to see the corner of the street.

"Renatchen, get away from that window, you're making me more nervous than I am already." My mother's voice, impatient, she threw the cards in a heap.

Mrs. Drexler stuck her head in the door. "Excuse me Mrs.Wolf, your husband just called." Not having a phone, we had to rely on messages from the landlady. "He said he is calling from down-town, he's all right, you're not to worry, he's on his way home." Than you Mrs. Drexler, thank you very much."

The landlady ready to leave, turned around, "Are you all right, Mrs. Wolf?" "Mrs. Drexler, what exactly did my husband say?" Mrs. Drexler 's nervous little figure hurried off. She called over her shoulder, "I have to do something about those people out there. I may have to borrow some bedding from you." My mother closed the door, slumped momentarily against it; a heavy sigh of relief escaped her, ending in a deep sob. I threw my arms about her, hugging her hard.

"Don't cry Mutti, please don't cry. Pappi will be home soon."

Resolutely, my mother pulled herself together and headed for the kitchen she shared with the landlady. "Come on, sweetheart, " her voice bright with attempted cheerfulness, "let's fix your Pappi some lunch."

When my father walked in, I was shocked at his appearance. His gray hair was rumpled beneath his beige Stetson. His shirt and brown suit disheveled. He said very little, only that he had stopped for coffee at the Café, the one belonging to a Swiss national, and had almost been arrested. My mother exploded with pent-up emotion, pounding her fists against his chest, screaming that she had warned him time and again not to go to that café. "It's dangerous."

She screamed her voice hoarse, out of control. She knew the day would come when all coffeehouses would be raided, regardless of the owner's nationality. She had been exasperated with worry, how dare he deliberately expose himself to such danger? Leaning against his shoulder, her back heaved with silent sobs of relief. "I was terrified for you Ernst." She managed a smile. "Sit down, Ernst I'll get you some lunch. That soup's been simmering for hours, I hope it's not all boiled away."

I had never heard my parents raise their voices to each other. Occasionally, before these times, there were muffled discussions in the privacy of their bedroom. In front of us children there would never be more than a look or a frown between them. Even today my father had endured my mother's anguish, responding with no more than an appeasing "Ruthy, it's all right. I'm sorry."

Relieved that the tension between my parents had passed, I started setting a place for my father's lunch. I pulled up a chair and anxiously awaited the account of what had happened to him.

Leaning forward on the small round table, I watched my father sipping his hot soup. His hand holding the spoon shook slightly. There were lines around his eyes I had never noticed before. Seeing him like that made me want to hug him, but I knew that at this moment he was miles away. Telling how much I loved him and how anxiously I wanted him home would have to wait.

My mother tore the soft center out off a roll on my father's plate and nervously kneading it into a small ball. "What happened, Ernst? You said you were almost arrested."

"Sweetheart, why don't you see if you can help Mrs. Drexler, with those poor people out there. I'm sure she can use your help.." "Let her stay, Ernst,

she 's been waiting for you to come home." My mother looked at me ruefully, "she's seen so much today, too much. " Well all right, for a minute."

My father's gray eyes stared out into space, somewhere beyond the room. "You know, Ruthy, Max Bernstein was there, the man who told me about those South American countries accepting Jewish immigrants. I saw them loading him into a truck as I was leaving." My father stopped again, the distant look returned. He twisted his bushy brow between his right thumb and forefinger as he does when he is pondering some deep problem.

"They let you go Pappi, why did they let you go?" I was anxious for my father to get on with his account. My father reached across the table and gently stroked my cheek. "Let me finish my soup and then I'll tell you." He scooped up the last of his soup and wiped his mouth.

"As you know, Ruthy, that café has foreign ownership."

My father was a wonderful storyteller; my sister and I loved his stories, his attention to detail often drove my mother to distraction. "Go on, Ernst, what happened?"

The owner refused to close the café to Jews. He always maintained being a foreigner the Nazis could not tell him what to do. You are right, of course, the Nazis do as they please. As far as I was concerned, it was a place where I could talk to other men who were also seeking papers for immigration. It was an opportunity to find out where visas were given, where the waiting was longest or shortest and which officials in the government were friendly or unfriendly. In short it is, or I'm afraid it was, a place where we could exchange all kinds of useful information. Quite frankly, there I could sit down for a few minutes , have a cup of coffee, read the paper, (there was always a

good supply of foreign papers), and rest my tired bones from standing in line and running from one office to the next."

My father stopped, once again it seemed he was somewhere miles away. My mother gently touched his hand.

"Go on, Ernst, please, tell us what happened."

"Well yes, I had been standing in line for hours at the French Embassy, trying to get your visa, Ruthy. I only saw a minor official. I explained to him that your father was dying of lung cancer and that you needed to be with your mother. He said his hands were tied, no visas were being issued at the moment, and I must bring papers proving that you were born in the United States. I felt discouraged and tired, so I decided to rest a little before facing the lines in front of the American Embassy."

My father stopped, slowly lit a cigarette, leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "Then what happened, Pappi?"

"There was nothing unusual as I approached the café, no trucks, no official cars, no one about in uniform, nothing!" Not until I walked in, did I realize something was amiss. I had in fact walked into a trap, and it was of course impossible to leave. A Nazi standing just inside the door, grabbed me be the arm and pushed me into the café."

While my father was talking, a collection of bread balls my mother had been kneading accumulated on the table in front of her.

I was ordered to one of the small tables, one of my favorite ones near the window and was told to wait. All the regulars were there, many of them my friends. At a table nearby, an older man, definitely not Jewish, was being given a severe scolding by a young man in uniform for frequenting an

establishment that caters to Jews. " My father's voice rose in anger. " That Nazi, that wet behind the ear brat, upbraiding a man three times his age! That man was allowed to leave. It appeared that all able to prove that they were not Jewish received a severe reprimand but finally were let go."

My father again inhaled from his cigarette then stubbed the half-finished butt hard in the ashtray.

"Sitting there waiting for what seemed an eternity, I was trying to visualize the documents in my briefcase. Did I have any papers that could somehow be construed as suspicious? I remembered your mother's letter from Paris about your Papa's illness. You know, Ruthy, how she always writes just what she thinks. I had intended to take it to the French Embassy. I hoped it might show the urgency of your case. I couldn't check in my briefcase, it might attract attention or it may look like I had something to hide. I tried to remember the contents of my pockets of my billfold. How much money did I carry? Did any of this really matter? Were these Nazis looking for something specific or was it just a routine search? Will any of us leave here to go home? What will happen to you, Ruthy, and the children if I am arrested?"

My father attempted to light another cigarette. My mother had to steady his hand, the one holding the lighter. My father leaned back, closing his eyes for a few moments saying nothing. I was afraid to urge him on, he looked tired, but then he sat up and continued.

"I saw a Nazi officer swagger towards my table. He seemed about my age, fiftyish. Oh dear God, I thought, here it comes. 'Stand up! I want to see your papers.' He was Viennese, not one of those Germans, Hitler brought in after the Anschluss. 'Empty your briefcase on the table. All of it.' I fumbled with

the clasp that always sticks. 'Quick, I don't have all day.' The latch gave way and I dumped everything on the table. I did not see your mother's letter there. Maybe it was in my coat pocket. The man picket up the application for your French visa. He asked 'What's that?'. I told him about your father being sick. 'No Jewish sob stories, the sooner you Jews leave Austria, the better we'll like it.' He told me to empty the contents of my pockets on the table. I was terrified that your mother's letter would show up. She said something about 'that swine' it, I remembered."

"You left it on the bureau. I found it after you had gone." My mother shook her head incomplete disbelief. "The good Lord was with us. I must warn Mama; she can get us into terrible trouble."

"Let me finish, Ruthy. Renatchen, sweetheart, you're lucky your Pappi is here to tell the tale. Anyway, I pulled my glasses, billfold, keys, and handkerchief, everything, out of my coat pockets. He touched some of the things with tips of his fingers, gingerly as though I might have some terrible infectious disease. Finally he asked if that was all. 'What about that pocket in your vest?' Then I remembered, that I had stuck the Iron Cross, my WWI decoration, in my vest pocket. I thought it might just help some day. I pulled it out and placed it on the table. Frankly, I did not hold out much hope. He looked at it and then at me. 'Where did you get that?' he screamed. 'In Turkey, I fought in Turkey. I saved some men's lives in an avalanche.' His voice seemed quieter, a little friendlier. 'I fought in Turkey in the war.' You know, Ruthy, I think there was a slight smile on his face. Then with a great sweep of his arm he threw my things on the floor. He screamed : 'Pick up that stuff and get out of here'. Abruptly he turned and walked away."

"Believe me, I hurried out of that place. When I came to the front of the café, there were men standing with their faces to the wall. Trucks were lined up on the street and men were being loaded onto them."

My father sat back; the hand holding his cigarette shook uncontrollably. I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly, never wanting to let him go. "I love you Pappi."

For right now at least, my father was safe.